

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**LIBRARY OF CONGRESS  
AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER  
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**INFORMANT: GEORGE CHIGAS [GREEK]  
CONDUCTED BY: TOM RAMKIN AND DOUG DENATALE  
DATE: SEPTEMBER 2, 1988**

**T = TOM  
G = GEORGE  
D = DOUG**

**LFP TR-R022**

T: Okay. Doug, why don't you give us the ah, name, and I mean the place [unclear].

D: Okay. Today is Wednesday, September 2, and we're in the National Park Service Library with George Chigas, and Tom Ramkin, and Doug DeNatale. DA-NA!

T: George how do you pronounce your last name? I've heard several people pronounce it.

G: Um, I pronounce it Chigas.

T: That's what I thought.

D: Chigas. Okay.

G: Chigas, is fine too.

T: But it actually a chi, the ch is a chi sound? (G: Uh huh) Okay.

G: Yeah.

T: Um, How should we start? Why don't we first start with you just saying where you were born and when, and um, a little about your family.

G: Okay. All right. I was born in Boston Massachusetts on September 14, 1958. Ah, the son of a Greek dentist and Greek school teacher. Um, when I was born my father was in Dental School at the time. (T: Umhm) And ah, he was later stationed in Germany ah, in the Army. And we

later moved from there ah, back to Lowell where my father grew up. And ah, we lived in ah, ah, on Washington Street in Lowell, which is across, near the Merrimack River across from University of Lowell. And ah, my mother went to University of Lowell after she graduated from Tufts University, and got her Masters from University of Lowell. Um, I never went to the Lowell Schools um, and in 1968 we moved from Lowell to Chelmsford where I still live now.

T: Umhm.

D: What about your own education?

G: Um, I also went to Tufts, where I majored in the Classics.

T: When were you at Tufts?

D: You might have been there at the same time.

G: I graduated in um, 1980.

T: Yeah, so did I.

G: Wow. [Laughter]

D: Fellow classmates.

G: No kidding.

T: That's amazing. (G: Amazing) Yeah, I went to Tufts and the Museum School kind of simultaneously. But ah, studied history and Folklore. Jeff Tighton was there. This fellow that we were talking about who's at Brown. (G: Uh huh) He taught at Tufts in the English Department at the time.

G: Oh.

T: So I did a lot of work in the History and English Department. And then photography at the Museum School.

G: Oh, gees. Well I was, I bounced around a few different departments. I started, as many people do. Pre-Med. And ah, [chuckles] after one year I went to ah, Economics. (T: Uh huh) And then the third year I was in E.E. And then in the last year I did about five courses in the Classics a semester and graduated.

D: Oh.

T: Uh huh. Who did you study with in most of your Classics stuff? Was it any one person?

G: No. All, all members of the faculty really got a chance to [laughter], (T: That's interesting)

be terrorized by my participation. [Everyone laughs]

T: Well, we won't talk too much about Tufts.

D: What? Now which came first? Your involvement in the C.M.A.A., or your (George: unclear, all speaking at once) involvement with the community? How did that all come about?

G: Well, it started when um, I was living in California ah, for one year and a half. And while I was there I was trying to um, do work with the E.S.L., English as a Second Language in San Francisco Um, I volunteered for the YMCA there for two, or three months um, before moving back East. Um, before moving back East, I also tried to um, get a job with the Peace Corps. But they were saying well, I needed more experience in community work. And I thought that a couple of years of work with, would be helpful. So when I moved back in 19 ah, Christmas of 84, January of 85 ah, I was started looking for a job in E.S.L. And ah I, when I looked around I thought well, Lowell's a good place to start. And ah, I heard of the Cambodian Community coming in. And I got in contact with the Cambodian M.A.A., and asked if they were looking for anyone. Um, they weren't at the time, but um, they were still anxious to have volunteer help in the classroom. So, which I started doing in around July, after working at the Pollard Memorial Library for a couple of months. Um, so I did volunteering in July. Ah, they offered me a job in August, part time. And um, the part-time job in August turned into a full time job in October. Ah, it was in where I started working full time that I met Chanthy. I hadn't met her while I was working part time that I can remember, except perhaps seeing her, glimpsing her, because she worked in the main building and I worked in a classroom which were separated. When I started working full time I went for the first time to begin the day in the main building. And that's when I met Chanthy in October. And ah, one month later we were engaged to be married. And we were finally married in December of 1985. December 22nd.

T: Uh huh.

D: Was there a lot of negotiation that went on with the families, or the community [unclear].

G: Yeah, the marriage was somewhat complicated by ah, a social blunder on my part. Ah, when I first ah, met Chanthy she was living with her brother-in-law Narin Sao, who is the, was at the time the president of the community, of the Cambodian M.A.A. And um, she was living with Narin and her sister who is married to Narin. And ah, the first time I went over to visit Chanthy at Narin's house, I simply rang the door bell. Chanthy came to the door and I followed her upstairs to her, to her room, which she shared with Narin's sister. Um, I didn't announce myself. And ah, when Narin found me upstairs in Chanthy's room, and ah, he was upset mainly because of the fact that his sister wanted to get into the room and felt uncomfortable coming in when I was there. And I guess he was under a lot of pressure in the community at the time for different reasons. And it ended up being a very ugly scene in the kitchen. Once I came down and ah, that really started things off on a bad, on a bad foot. So ah, the negotiations ah, there were negotiations initially, where Chanthy's um, didn't have permission of her sister, who was her acting guardian at the time, to get married to me. Um, of course that was before she got to know me and found out what a nice guy I was. [laughter] But initially she had very bad feelings about it. Negative ah, negative feelings about it. So um, she did not give Chanthy her permission.

Well, I didn't stop there. I went over their heads and went to the Monk, who I was tutoring English at the time. Tutoring him in English. And I asked him to intercede in my behalf, which I did not know was another social blunder, because Monks aren't suppose to become involved in um, in the marriage ceremony other than just giving it their blessing. Um, they themselves of course are not allowed to marry, and ah, see it as another attachment to the [unclear?] world. Ah, so nonetheless I did. And since I was his teacher he, and we did get along very well, he decided to call Narin and um, try to rectify the situation. Let him know that I didn't mean any offense in coming to his house that day. And ah, I was acting unwittingly. Ah, that did convince Narin. And the next day when I went to work ah, I ah, was, waited for his car to come. And then I, when I met him I got in the car, and I told him that I would like to marry Chanthy, and asked for his permission. And ah, he said that it was okay with him. Ah, his sis, Chanthy's sister still wasn't convinced. And it took a phone call to, to their mother ah, to finally get her okay. And ah, we finally ah, were able to um, set a date for the engagement ceremony. The wedding takes place um, well there's two parts. There's the engagement ceremony and then there's the wedding ceremony itself. Um, the engagement ceremony ah, is time when the ah, representatives of the um, of the groom and the representatives of the bride meet to negotiate the cost that is going, the amount of money that will be spent for the wedding, and when it will take place. And um, essentially it also is a time where the ah, groom must state his financial situation and ah, um, obtain the consent of the bride's representatives, of her guardians. Up till that point it really isn't, her acceptance isn't official until they ah, consent that, well this young man has sufficient wealth and standing in the community to be honored with the engagement of the bride. And ah, for that occasion I had to get all the necessary papers together and ah, show a piece of paper that indicated that I did in fact um, own my own home, own my own piece of land.

T: So you literally have to show legal documentation that you (G: Right) It's not just saying I have this much money.

G: Right. Yeah, I had to bring bank books. [laughs] And in fact ah, the person representing me was not my father, which is ah, although he was present um, but we solicited the, the ah, person who was renowned for his negotiations abilities in the community. He's never lost a case reputation [laughs]. That was Rev. Noy Pen, who is active in the Temple and active in the community, and quite a persuasive speaker. And he was the one representing me during the engagement process. And he ah, pointed out that I owned an acre of land. I built my own house. I had x number of dollars in the bank. Um, and ah was the tutor of the Monk, which carried some weight. Ah, and even though I knew in Narin and Cunya, Chanthy's sister's name was Cunya, in Narin and Cunya's heart and mind that they had consented by that time, it was still a necessary formality to go through. And he still proved to be very convincing.

T: Did you have any idea what you needed to say, to be convincing? You know, how much you needed to own?

G: Um, well, I had heard traditionally that um, when a man and woman are to be married, the man must first go into the forest and cut bamboo and build his own house. In Cambodia a person doesn't need to have title to the land. Um, technically all the land is owned by the king. And um, through his beneficence the subjects of the kingdom can, can um, take residence on a portion of land. There, I guess, are not specific deeds and boundaries. Although people will somehow

designate which land is theirs, and which is their neighbors. Um, so I had heard that a man will have built his own house by the time he becomes engaged. And have a certain amount of money. And I guess it translated into something like five or ten thousand dollars. Ah, which I didn't have. [laugh] Ah, [laugh] In fact ah,

T: So you, you actually ah, sort of knew the kind of case you were preparing for.

G: Yeah, yeah. Ah, and that's why the I needed to um, produce the piece of paper stating that ah, (--)

T: Right. One question I had. When you were talking earlier about, you know, the faux pas, the first time you went to her house and the negotiations afterwards with the Monk, what was Chantry doing while you were trying to patch up? What was her position in all of that?

G: Well, she was standing by and ah, and had stopped speaking with her sister. And although living at Narin and Cunha's house um, her presence was, was not really known. She was sort of a ghost. Came and left without speaking to anyone. And ah, she, she was upset. And ah, there were extenuating circumstances as well. Other than that um, she in fact, and I don't even know if I'm at liberty to say this (--)

D: Well actually I wanted to make sure that, you know, we sit here that, that, you know, I know that a lot of this stuff is personal and, you know, um, we're not looking for any personal (G: Yeah) [laugh] you know, intimate details or anything like that. (G: Okay) So don't, you know, don't feel like you have to bare your soul, (G: yeah, it probably) or anything like that.

G: Yeah. Okay. She, she was upset. Didn't really take an active part in trying to rectify the situation. She um, was going to wait and see what happened. And ah, our only source of recourse that we knew was ah, was the Venerable Monk. And he was the most persuasive. As well as another friend who worked with us, Hang Bunchia, who you might have met at the Temple last week, who is very active in organizing the fund raising and was a previous, was previously a Monk. And um, well respected for his religious um, beliefs. And ah, he as well, he ah, and his father interceded on our behalf, as well as the Monk. And in fact went to see Narin one day, um, with the Venerable Sao Khun ah, to, to discuss the situation. And it was finally after ah, they had went to see him, gone to their house. I was waiting at the Temple, um, the old Temple at the time. Before it moved to North Chelmsford it was on Fletcher Street. Um, or off of Fletcher Street on Franklin Court. Um, I was waiting there for them to come back and tell me what the verdict was. So I was very nervous. And they came back with the good news that Narin and Cunha had come around. And I was really happy about it. And ah, and it was a little bit spooky, because I was, it was in the middle of Decem, or by that time it was still beginning of November I guess, around then. And it was cold up in that apartment. They didn't have, they didn't turn on the heat very high. And we were waiting in there shivering in our coats. And ah, the Monks at that time were wearing long underwear, which was sort of an innovation on their part, because they never had any addition to their normal robe and sandals. They were wearing long underwear and woolen socks, and went around with wool hats pulled over their ears. And it's kind of funny looking, and gloves on. And ah, we were drinking tea. And ah, finally Narin, ah Hang had come back with his father. They sat down and told me the good news that Narin

and Cunya had consented. And ah, the phone rang and Venerable knew it was for me. And I was mystified because how did he know it was for me. But in fact it wasn't. It was Chanthy calling to tell her that she had been, she was told the good news too and how happy she was. And ah, from that time we went to ah, the next day I announced to Narin that I would like to formally engage Chanthy, and to set up a date for the um, for the engagement negotiations.

T: Where did that take place, the negotiations?

G: At Narin's house. It's quite a ceremony. Ah, we all met at the Temple ah, on Franklin Court. My, all the members of my family. Ah, my mother, my father, ah, um, even my grandfather came along. And ah, aunts and uncles. Ah, I mean we had to, the day before um, buy offerings to Chanthy's brother-in-law and sister. Ah, fruit, baskets of fruit, and ah, varieties. And there were specific quantities and types that we had to get. Two bunches of bananas, four apples, or two trays of four apples, everything in pairs. And we loaded them into my fathers truck the morning of the um, of the ceremony. And we went to Narin's house. And everybody lines up outside of the house, and is given one of the plates of fruit. And ah, then everyone files in and places them on the floor in ah, in two columns in front of Narin and Cunya who sit at the front of the room. And then all the people that are coming in my support, they're sort of character witnesses in a way, they all sit along the walls of the room. And ah, my representative sits directly before Narin and Cunya, who also have their negotiator. They don't directly negotiate. Their negotiating is done through a particular person as well. There was a woman and ah, she sat in front. And meanwhile Chanthy is waiting upstairs, because she cannot be part of it until the official consent is given. So after um, Noy Pen had stated my case and the other woman had bargained for more money for the expense of the wedding, that's when the dollar amount is set for how much will be spent on the wedding. Ah, is it going to be three thousand, or four thousand, or five thousand. It goes up to ten thousand. And ah, well, luckily Noy Pen kept it down to how much money I had, which was a little over three. So we ah, we settled on that. And once that was settled and um, final approval was, was announced by both, by both parties. Ah, Chanthy was allowed to come down. And ah, she ah, I can't remember if she was dressed in traditional clothing, or not. Um, well she certainly did act very ah, modest. And she came in with her face down. And um, didn't look at anybody. And came and sat in front of Narin and Cunya. And it was at that time that ah, I gave her the engagement ring. And she gave me an engagement ring. And traditionally we're suppose to also exchange gold necklaces, which we didn't do until the wedding ceremony. Ah, so we, we at that time ah, decided on the date in her ah, the date of the wedding ah, in her presence. That was, that decision was made with her there. And we wanted to have it before Christmas. We didn't want to wait till after Christmas. Which um, wasn't, didn't sit too well with Narin and Cunya. They thought it was too fast, because they are the ones responsible for preparing for the wedding, the place, the food and everything. Ah, the band.

T: So they prepare and you pay for it, basically.

G: Right. And ah, they also decide how much of the proceeds we're suppose to get. Everybody, the weddings are real, as you saw from last weekends ceremony, the fund raising capabilities of the community are unreal. And that's what the wedding is in fact. It's a fund raising for the marriage party. And ah, you invest three thousand for the wedding, but you get probably five

thousand back [unclear]. And that's how it worked out for us. Um, people were very generous. And then the more the merrier. It's sort of the, the invitations are given out um, on one day Narin and his brother went house to house handing out invitations. And ah, many, many people are invited. A big hall was rented. And ah, the more people that come the better. I, in fact, I didn't know the majority of people there.

T: Ah, ha. What was your family's ah, feeling about all this in general. I mean, however you want to talk about it, but don't feel like you have to talk about things you don't want to.

G: Yeah. [Laughs] Well their reaction of course ah, after my mother meeting Chanthy once, and my father meeting her once, for me to come the next week and say "well, you know the girl that you met last week? I've decided to marry her." [laughs again] They were, you know, stunned to say the least, but my father took it in stride really well. And ah, ah, he ah, didn't really raise any serious objection.

D: Well, one thing I was wondering in regard to that. I mean your father's generation, you know, is always sort of held up in Lowell as being the one where a lot of the boundaries between ethnic groups here broke down, and a lot of marriages between ethnic groups (--) Did he relate it? Was there any sort of relating to that, that kind of phenomenon?

G: Ah well, I don't know if he thought of it in those terms.

D: So it was never talked about, or anything in those terms.

G: He, he really ah, well my father had been divorced about, for five years prior at that point. And, or six years and had been remarried for two years. And um, if it happened six years ago he would have probably, you know, shook the walls down. He would have been just so against it. But he had gone through so many changes in that time that he ah, pretty much accepted it. And ah, my mother, my mother was less ah, convinced, easily convinced. And ah, she thought, you know, that we, that it was rushed. And of course by all appearances it was. We had only known each other for a month. And ah, she thought we should wait at least until next summer before getting married. But I was so sure about it that ah, there was nothing going to stop me. And ah, finally my mother said, "Well if you're going to go through with it, you're going to go through with it." And she gave her blessing.

T: Did they talk much about the negotiation, the ah, engagement ceremony, service negotiations? Did your parents?

G: Well my mother didn't come to it, but my father did. And it was a week before he was going to have a knee operation. Ah, and custom is when you go into a room you sit on a floor cross legged. And ah, of course that was impossible for him to do. And he had to have a special chair brought out with him, which nobody seemed to mind, even though it was an infraction of the ah, codes of ethics. In the presence of monks you have to sit in a lower seat than they do. But ah, nobody seemed to mind. And he, it was obvious to me that he was uncomfortable coming to this apartment. And ah, a slum district of Lowell. And ah, sitting in this room full of Cambodian

refugees who he'd never had really any contact with. Ah, although he tried to grin and bare it. Ah, he looked uncomfortable. And ah, physically and emotionally. It was better once we left the old Temple and had arrived at Narin's house where my other relatives were waiting. And we assembled in a long line. Um, and then things, he, he, and then he showed quite a bit of interest. Once we got in there he wanted to know what was being said in translation. So um, Hang who had spoken on our behalf earlier sat beside him and acted as a translator. And ah, and he was very interested and ah, I think enjoyed it in the end very much.

T: Was a lot of that in English, and was it translated into two languages so you knew?

G: No it was all conducted in Khmer. (T: Umhm) The whole proceeding. And ah, (--)

T: So you just had faith that you were being represented.

G: Yeah. [laughter] Well by that time I had picked up some of the language. And I could understand what he was saying, that, when he was saying that, you know, I have a car, I have a house, I have an acre of land. And I could tell when they were talking about how much are we going to have for the wedding. Three thousand, or four thousand. Well I could tell basically how things were going. And by the tone of voice when things were making progress and when there was a, an area of contention. So ah, it was, it was all playful really. I think there were, even though everyone hammed it up quite a bit. Ah, I think the end was really predetermined before we even started.

D: How, how do you think, what kind of role do you think your, the wedding played for the Cambodian community? Did it have any kind of a special meaning for it or?

G: Well, I think it was very, ah, assuring in a way. Reassuring for the community to see that ah, ah a Cambodian woman and an American man will become, were getting married. I think it was different than other, or previous immigrants, waves of immigrants, where they, people were really adamant about marrying within your own ethnic group. Um, the Cambodians seemed very glad that I was getting married to Chanthy. And um, most of the people had some idea of who I was, since I worked at the Cambodian M.A.A. And had, they had previously contact with me for either being in my English class, or some other reason that they'd come to the M.A.A. So I thought that they felt that um, that it was, it was a positive thing. And they were glad that ah, Camb, they saw that a Cambodian woman getting married to an American as very advantageous for her. They thought well American, he must be rich. They didn't know the truth. But they thought he must be rich. He must ah, it will be much easier for her to, to do things. Um, for many people there's a lot of ah, difficulty in even doing simple things like going to the bank, opening up bank accounts, buying a car, or taking out a loan. So this, being married to an American all that much easier. And they saw that as very beneficial to her. So they ah, it turned out very well.

T: Let me change this before we (--)

TAPE ENDS.



LFP-TR-R023

TAPE BEGINS WITH GEORGE IN MID-SENTENCE:

G: Yeah. First thing he told my grandmother ah, my aunt when he came to the party was ah, "Well I'm really proud of myself today. I pissed on everybody's basement window on the way down." [Laughter]

D: Oh man.

G: Told my father the only mistake Hitler made is he didn't get all of them. You know, it's just really sickening sometimes. I guess towards the end his anti-semitism was just like obnox, very obnoxious.

T: Yeah. What did, how old were you then?

G: I was ah, eleven. I was ten or eleven, something like that.

T: So you have pretty good memories of it.

G: Yeah. We used to play, his neighbor, the Speronis' were friends with my parents, and we used to, they had a son our, my age. And I'd go play football in their backyard. And that's, Kerouac lived next door at that time. And I can remember clearly him coming out when we were playing in his tee-shirt. And at the time his body was all bloated and he had a big pot belly, and his face was red and swollen. And he tried to convince me to go down to my father's house and get him a bottle of whiskey, and come down with me and drink it with him. I think he was kidding but ah, I think he was serious about getting the bottle of whiskey, [laughter] but kidding about me drinking with him. But ah, the neighbors said he would stand out in the middle of the street at night when the moon was up, and howl at the moon.

D: Yeah. It's really, it's real interesting to see the, you know, the controversy that erupted with the monument and all that.

G: Yeah. Yeah.

?: That book is gone.

G: No. It's there. I saw it.

?: Is it?

G: Yeah. It's um,

?: Isn't it Sampas' daughter's book? Or am I wrong?

INTERRUPTION IN THE TAPE

?: [Comment unclear]

G: Well, you never know.

E: Well you get, anything that you get from the Cambodian.

INTERRUPTION IN TAPE

T: ... broader things. Um, do you want me to have this?

G: Yeah you can.

T: If I can get it on here. Okay. Why don't you, George, just ah, generally describe the wedding and your observations of it and then.

G: Okay. Um, the wedding ah, ceremony had two parts to it. There was a morning part, and an evening part. The evening was essentially the reception. And the morning was the wedding ceremony, which was condensed into one day, uh, which traditionally from what I understand lasts three days. So in the morning when the ceremony was going on, um, to signify the change of days um, Michael Ben Ho, who works for the department of social services and is a friend of ours, and works in the community quite a bit, rang a gong to ah, kind of announce the beginning of the next day, or. He also, the gong was also rang to, when the bride and groom ever left or entered the room. Um, the morning of the ceremony ah, as I was saying earlier, it's kind of foggy because I was really nervous that day. And ah, I didn't say anything the whole day practically. [Chuckles] Kind of was led by the arm by the people that were dressing us up and undressing us, and putting us into positions that we had to be ah, to perform the ceremony. And there was no rehearsal at all. So I just really had to ah, kind of listen and follow, watch and repeat. And ah, well it started out similar to the engagement, in that the um, the grooms party assembled outside the house. And ah, we lined up again and every person had an offering of fruit. Or this time we also had other, other things besides fruit. There was a pig's head, which I guess is ah, one of the main symbolic offerings, with the tail in its mouth. That was, that was stipulated by Chanthy's mother in California. We had to have that or (--)

T: And that comes from the groom.

G: That comes from the groom. Yeah. Um, and as well as all the fruit, baskets of fruit. And that, I had two attendants. Ah, they would be sort of the best men. There wasn't a specific best man but, there was, it can be at least two, up to four or five. People who act as attendants during that day. In case we need something, they go off and get it and come back. Um, [unclear] I chose two American friends. And ah, two old friends, Carl and John. And ah, we all assembled

in front of Narin's house. It was, the, the morning ceremony took place at Narin's house again. And it was decorated with um, the usual party favors. The paper ah, the colored paper twirls on the wall and ah, the hanging paper stars. And ah, the room was cleared out so everybody could come and sit down. And we entered and once again all the members of the grooms party sat. In fact everybody involved in the wedding sat along the wall, and in rows. And the first part of the ceremony involves the Monks coming. And the Monks come. Ah, we didn't have musicians there at our wedding, but um, I guess other people do. The Monks, at the time there were two Monks who lived on Franklin Court. Ah, Venerable Sao Khun and his assistant. And they both came. They filed in ah, and they sat down at the, at the head of the room on pillows. And Chanthy and I sat directly in front of them. And the rest of the wedding party behind. And they um, chanted and essentially blessed the ceremony. And to officially convey merit on all the people there, they blessed the holy water and um, sprinkled all the people in the wedding party with holy water. And during, during the ceremony there was a um, one of the lead, the head priests, and I believe pronounced Acar or Arcar, something like that, who um, is a religious leader. A lay religious leader. And he read off the um, the ah, code of marriage, which includes a list of things that the bride and groom must, must vow. Promises that we vow to keep. I'm not sure if that happened right after the Monks, or before. I think it was after. The um, Monks were offered food after they were, they gave the blessing, and ah, the, the spirits as well. The spirits of the household offered a small amount of food. And most of the people there kind of took the ah, animistic side of things pretty lightly, and without very seriously doing it. In fact Michael Ben Ho was saying, "well we don't have to give them much, they don't eat too much." [Laughter] You know, little balls to the side.

D: So the, the, the Cambodians, you're talking about the Cambodians who had took, took it lightly.

G: Yeah. Took it very lightly, the Cambodians. Ah, most of the people there um, um, that work in social services and um, have ah, don't, don't exactly follow the, the same traditions. That there seems to be quite a distinction between those who do, and those who don't. And there's a, ah, those, the those, those of the people who don't, um, usually have come from the city, and have had more education. And the vast majority of the people who do, which involves quite a bit of the community, I think, um, were the rural farmers. (T: Umhm) And ah, so the, the offering of food was made. And we started moving on, and the gong was sounded. And Chanthy and I, we changed. Each of us changed three times that day. Ah, Chanthy had a special hairdresser, and her attendants to dress her up. And I think they spent a good part of the morning just making up her face and hair. Two or three hours. And it's really beautiful the way they do it. And the tresses of hair are all neatly placed and pinned and ah, it's very intricate. Um, myself on the other hand it's basically, well we're dressing up as kind of a king and queen, a prince and princess. And they were dressed in these real glittering, sparkly clothes. And ah, sequined dress, and ah, sequined jacket. And ah, we're both barefoot. And we first go down there. And um, I wish I could have refreshed my memory with pictures, or something, because the chronology, I just can't remember at the time. But at one point, um, perhaps it was the first time, we go and we're sitting in chairs. And the chairs are draped with um, thick plush uh, covering. And we sit there. And it's much like a throne it seemed, as the king and queen take their place. And um, we listened to the ah, this is after the Monks have left, because we're sitting now in a chair. And the Monks have left. They can't be present during um, this actual ceremony. That they um, I guess,

officially do not want to encourage it, since it is against their belief. But they do acknowledge it, and bless the happening. (T: Umhm) So when we took our places in chairs um, this might have been where the Arca ah, reads off the list of things that we must ah, vow to keep. A list of vows. And they included things like, and it was all spoken in Khmer, and then later translated by Michael Ben Ho, who gave pretty much more of a synopsis than an actual translation. Ah, and they were basically that we must respect our parents um, respect each other, ah, the man protects the woman, the woman pro, ah, fends, or provides necessities for the man. I don't, I don't remember what they were ah, specifically. Ah, but I said yes to all of them. I didn't put up any fight. And ah, they sounded good to me. And ah, [laughter] then we went up and we, the gong sounded again and we got up. And we went up and changed again. And um, this time ah, we came down and Chanthy was wearing, at one time she wore ah, um, a kind of pants that kind of wraps under between the legs. And it sort of has pantaloons, come to the knee and it wraps behind. The next time she comes down and it was a different ah, a dress, more of a dress. And ah, I also changed. I put on a coat this time coming down. And ah, the second time we dressed we weren't sitting in a chair. We were, I think, kneeling on, on the floor. And um, we had to take other vows, or something. I'm really unclear about it. And we ended up leaving and changing for a third time and the third time we come down, and this I do remember a little better. We, there's a pillow on the floor. And Chanthy takes a place on one side of the pillow. I take a place on the other. And we lean forward. And it's a very uncomfortable position. Ah, we lean forward and we both have our hands together ah, in a position of praying. And we're leaning forward kind of on our elbows, resting on our elbows and to the side. Ah, and during this time we're, we're listening to more, more of the vows given by the Arca. And I believe that there's something about this where there's a sword ah, next to, next to me. But we didn't have a sword, but something else to symbolically replace it. And the sword comes from some ah, a folk tale where ah, a prince was being married. And ah, his, he didn't have a sword with him, or the sword was out of the sheath. And somebody came to steal his wife away, and was able to kill him and take his wife. And he was unprepared. So it was necessary that we have the sword, and the sword must be in the sheath. It's important. And ah, so we sat down, and was leaning forward on our elbows on a pillow, Chanthy and I side by side. And it's very uncomfortable. We had to hold that position for quite a while. And um, after listening to the vows, every person that was present in the wedding party came up to us um, and knelt before us and took from this glass that had ah, little strips, threads of string, wrapped over it. Took one of the threads and wished us well, and tied the string, the cotton string, around our wrist. Ah, each person did it in succession. Ah, and this I believe also was a gesture of ah, good will. And also symbolically had the power of protecting us from evil spirits. That's often used. That people wear cotton thread around the wrist. And each person came up individually and wished us well, and tied the string. So in the end we had about fifteen, or twenty on each of our wrists. And ah, when that was done um, we ah, left the main room downstairs where everyone else was. And while they were being served food we went upstairs into one of the bedrooms. And Michael Ben Ho and Chanthy's attendants, and my attendants were present. And we both sat on the bed. And this was, this is really the ah, the juicy stuff. Now Michael ah, has an assortment of fruit. And it's necessary to use a banana, grapes, and also a cigarette. Ah, Chanthy holds ah, lights a cigarette for me. She does that. And then Michael holds a cluster of grapes between us, and we both have to reach and eat, eat one of the grapes from it. And he tries to tease us by pulling them away. And ah, ah, making us try to kiss. I guess that's what he's trying to make us do, ah, get close together. And then he pulls them away so we, we kiss. And really toying with the modesty of

the bride. And then ah, we both eat ends of a banana [laugh]. It gets really, really [unclear].

T: Is this in, with the whole wedding party there?

G: Don't (--) Only, only a few people come upstairs.

T: Oh, okay.

G: The rest of the wedding party I believe was downstairs eating at this point. Now they'd gone through, they'd sat down for this three hour or so ceremony. And now everybody had an appetite and was eating from the food prepared by Chanthy's sister Cunya. And ah, so once we had finished that um, Michael had fed us the grapes, the banana, and Chanthy lit the cigarette. Um, I think the ceremony was officially over, and we changed into our regular clothes and went down to join the rest of the people with, and enjoyed the food. And ah, shortly afterwards people started leaving, and getting ready to come back later for the evening at around five o'clock, when we had the reception at a restaurant in Dracut. Um, and at the restaurant we had ah, we got there early and made sure everything was ready of course. And um, the bride and groom have a real official responsibility to provide and take care of all the guests. They really don't ah, ah, sit back and enjoy the wedding. They're very actively finding people places to sit making sure the food is ready um, never taking their seat until everyone is finally seated and has their food prepared. And um, their first responsibility is to stand by the door and greet every person that comes in. And um, tie, or clip, or pin a small flower. Usually a silk flower that the bride I think traditionally makes. Chanthy didn't make it in this case. Um, they were either bought, or made from someone who else, bought from someone else who made them. And everybody comes in, every man and woman that comes in are pinned with the, with the flower on the lapel, or the, or the gown. And they've given, they've taken their seats. And a few certain things that are required to have on the table was um, well there had to be a bottle of Hennessy Cognac. That was one of the things that we had to have. Um, everybody had to have at least one bottle of beer. And then um, the menu was pretty much open. We, we chose from the, the assortment of food. It was basically ah, Szechwan Style Chinese food. And ah, there was a little, doubt on the part of Narin that the people would like this food. It's not usually used. Um, a lot of people I guess ah, have different dishes that are ordered from China Town and are brought up, or are prepared here. And that style of food wasn't very ah, isn't too popular ah, used at as far as weddings go. Although I think more people have started to use it now. I've been to a couple of weddings at a place called Lin Garden up in, I think it's Dracut, where they serve the same style food. And a lot of people are using that place as a wedding. But at, for the food. But at that time um, most of the people ah, Narin in particular thought well, that we were taking a chance serving this food. Luckily everybody did enjoy it. And during, during the time when it's, the food is being prepared it was taking a long time. There were about twelve or thirteen tables with ten people at a table. And the kitchen wasn't getting the food prepared very quickly. And ah, Michael Ben Ho was running back and forth, and I was constantly being told that it was taking too long. And the important thing is, is the guests have to be pleased, because depending on how much they like the food, and how pleased they are depends on how much they're going to leave in the envelope. Cause [laughter] ah, towards the end of the ah, of the reception every table is ah, envelopes are passed out at every table. And people put their donation ah, their present into the envelope and some, one of my attendants will go around with a basket and collect all the envelopes later. Um,

gifts are unusual. Gifts in a form of like ah, toasters and what else, whatever, all the obvious stuff that you usually expect at a wedding. Ah, it's mainly money, which makes sense.

[Laughter] And so while it was taking long for the food to be prepared, and everybody's starting to panic, I'm starting to panic because Michael's saying, [George whispers this] "people aren't going to give you any money because and you're going to lose." It's really a financial deal here.

T: [Laughter] Or investment.

G: Yeah. That we're going to lose our thirty-five hundred that we spent on the wedding. So I go in the kitchen and I ask what's taking so long. And I see that things are finally coming along, and people are served. And um, ah, the food came out. And there was no ah, wedding table. My parents and family sat at different tables around, around the restaurant. And they were a little bit insulted by that. They thought that there should be a designated place for them to sit, and sort of enjoy a place of honor. But um, I think that they were pretty flexible. And ah, well people ate. Chanthy and I finally got to sit down. We never really sat down and enjoyed the meal. It was pretty much we took bites here and there. If a new party came in later on, we'd have to get up go and give them the flow, the flower at the door, and prepare a table for them if there wasn't one ready. Ah, so once we finally did finish eating and the food was cleared, most of the people, the majority of people left pretty quickly. And um, [unclear] the money envelopes were collected and the band was playing all the time. And ah, towards the end people started doing a little bit of dancing. And there was a combination of Rock-n-Roll and traditional songs being played. And ah, it went along pretty well. And around, it started at I think 5:00, or so, and by 9:30 or 10:00 almost every, everybody had left. And we were exhausted. [Laughter]

T: Was there ever any doubt in your mind that you would, you and Chanthy's mind together, that you all would have a traditional Cambodian wedding?

G: No. I was, I was from the very first word it was, we're going to do a Cambodian traditional wedding. And I wanted it that way. And ah, since I really had no tradition to refer to, that I really felt close about, or felt that I had to observe. Um, you know, if we had some, some band with an accordion to go up there and play the ah, cut the cake song, you know. I don't really, that to me was a traditional American wedding. That's what happened at the weddings that I'd been too. And that didn't appeal to me at all. Ah, and I thought this was a great opportunity, and ah, to really enjoy a truly ethnic wedding. And ah, we really looked forward to having it, doing it traditionally.

T: Let's see. That's a great description.

D: Yeah. Wasn't it. Was there any pressure from your family? I mean were there any suggestions from the family saying, "well why don't you have, why don't you follow up with a church wedding", Or anything like that?

G: Ah, that was suggested, um, but I don't think too strongly. I think it might have been suggested at one point. By this time ah, I think everyone from my side of the family was saying, well they ah, or just going along with what happen. And they didn't really see ah, ah much, much opportunity to change what was going to happen. Ah, the, there was somewhat from

Chanthy's side. That we had, when it got down to the specifics what are we going to have for the meal when we went to the restaurant. That, I was adamant. You know, I wanted to have the Szechwan style of food, because I liked it. Even though Narin wasn't familiar with it and thought it might be taking a chance um, I, I kind of insisted on doing it that way. And it turned out all right. Otherwise, I went along with most everything that Narin and Cunya had said.

T: The ah, the Hennessey and beer, just quickly, how does that fit in with kind of Buddhist ah,

G: Right.

T: Dogma and ah, and the whole notion of abstention from alcohol, and merit points, and all of that?

G: Yeah. Well, there are, the people that came to the wedding, now most of the people that go to the wedding, and most people that go to the Temple um, who go to the Temple on the major celebrations like you went to yesterday, or last Sunday. Um, most of them, they may mouth the words to the Five Precepts, but don't follow them. And sometime may not even understand what they're reciting. I think it's very true. There are some people who do and really stick to them closely. And one of them would have been Hang, who helped us out earlier. He wouldn't go to a wedding for that reason, because people are drinking alcohol. And he by being in their presence would, one might lose some of his own merits.

D: Just as a footnote here, the Five Precepts, are they not, am I right in thinking that it's not, that they're not spoken in Khmer. [Comment unclear]

G: Yeah. When they, on the tapes that you recorded they recited in Parlee, the religious, the language. (D: Okay) Ah, and ah, almost all of chanting is done in that language. And they take the Five Precepts, Parlee, and at every celebration the three refuges, refuges are recited. Refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and Sunnah.

D: So that's how the average person could participate in chanting without quite realizing what(--)

G: Yeah. It's sort of like (--)

T: Like Latin.

G: Yeah. Yeah. Just sort of automatically repeating and (--)

T: Right. Some people do that in English.

G: Yeah, we say, Our Father who art in heaven [mumbles], we kind of mumble along and ps-ps-ps along and not really know what they're saying.

T: And then go out and do it.

G: Ah, but I think for the people, at every wedding that I have been to has had a bottle of Hennessey on the table.

T: Well I, the only one that I went to, I kind of crashed a wedding reception and asked if I could take some pictures. There was, and I went in and I noticed all these bottles, several bottles of Hennessey. And I didn't know what it meant, but I could tell that there, there must be a re (--) Either these people you know, very much like that, but it was the only hard liquor around.

G: It must, must have something to do with um, like smoking ah, I don't know the names of the foreign cigarettes that are very popular, but most of the Cambodians like to, like to smoke the imported French cigarettes, and the imported French liquor. I think it is somewhat of a status symbol.

T: Ah ha, from the colonization.

G: Yeah. And ah, and to have the Hennessey on the table is, might have only been affordable by um, very rich people in Cambodia. And to do that here is sort of a statement of position.

T: Is there much drinking at these things? Or is it fairly (--)

G: Well it, it there's a few who I think ah, I think it's typical of all weddings. There will be the two or three guys who really over drink. Um, the women abstain almost totally from drinking, that I've seen. Um, and the majority of men will have a few beers and maybe one, or two glasses of the Cognac.

D: Just briefly, the tapes about to run out, but ah, one of the things that really interests us in Lowell here, is a motion of community space. I'm real interested in the way the different groups move through the city. You know, get established in particular places and express their, their identity there. And just curious, you know, whether you had any sort of general observations that you've noticed about the Cambodian Community and their interaction with the city here.

G: Mmm, as far as what people take residency and where they move from? Like once, once they've established?

D: Yeah, and have you notice, you notice any particular patterns here [unclear]?

G: Well the, the Acre obviously is the place where people ah, most affordable housing. And people first move there. Um, but I guess a similar pattern is, would be that after someone has been there, lived in the Acre or lived in the outskirts of the Acre, more preferable housing is sought out. Ah, and in case of Narin's case and Cunya's case, they, well they lived on the outskirts of the Acre. And then they moved to um, another area that was less congested, and little more privacy, and a little less intimidating. And, and then, and then a one step from that would be the case of Michael Ben Ho who I guess he lived in the Acre at one point, or perhaps he moved from California. I know he moved from California and then he bought a house in a similar area that, that Narin lived, but now he's moved to North Chelmsford.



D: I was curious now with the Temple there, is there, is that seen now as a place where people would like to, like to be close to?

G: Ah, well it's be, it's becoming a, it's certainly established. Ah, there seems to be a real dedicated core group of people who, who support that, the Temple, and who attend the majority of the ceremonies. Ah, I think as was evidence to last Sunday, um, the Temple is still seen as an important expression of nation, of heritage national identity. As even though I think that might be the first, or second time any, many of those people have ever been to the temple for that kind of thing, a money tree fund raising ceremony, um, everybody attends as sort of a um, something to show that yes I do believe in Cambodia.

Tape ends.